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ABSTRACT

Although the suicide rate of young adults has increased dramatically, few empirical studies examine suicide in the normal population. To examine suicidal thinking and behavior in a college student sample, 43 female and 23 male college students responded to an adverse life event scenario and then filled out an extended questionnaire regarding suicidal thinking and behavior. Results showed that 39 % of the subjects had seriously considered suicide, and 8 percent had made a suicide attempt. Females were significantly more likely to have thought about suicide during the previous year, but males were as likely as females to report using suicide as a threat or manipulation. Although past research indicates that suicide projectors have higher rates of suicidal thinking, the fact that 62% of this sample were projectors raises questions about the validity of the projective method. (Author/JAC)

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Suicidal Risk Among College Students

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Abstract

The suicide rate of young adults has increased dramatically during the past decade. Few empirical studies examine the problem of suicide in regard to the thinking and behavior of persons in the normal population. This study examines suicidal thinking and behavior of a college student sample. Forty-three female and twenty-three male college students served as subjects. Each subject responded to an adverse life event scenario and then filled out an extended questionnaire regarding suicidal thinking and behavior. Thirty-nine percent of the subjects had seriously considered suicide and 8% had made a suicide attempt. A number of other findings of empirical and/or applied significance were obtained. In some cases the data reflected conclusions which are drawn in the published literature. For example, females were significantly more likely to have thought about suicide during the past year. However, some of the conclusions in the literature regarding suicide risk may be flawed. For example, males were as likely as females to have reported using suicide as a threat or manipulation. In addition to the preceding finding, information regarding the causes and/or factors associated with the subjects' suicidal risk were obtained.

Suicidal Risk Among College Students[1]

The occurence of suicide and suicide attempts in adolescents and young adults is an increasing social problem in the United States. In a 1966 study, Teicher and Jacobs reported suicide as the fourth most common cause of death in the 15-19 age group. Nemy (1973) rated suicide even higher as cause of death, rating it second to adolescent deaths due to accidents. In the young adult age group (20-24) one in every 10,000 males and one in 30,000 females commit suicide (Leonard and Flinn, 1972).

Although there are no truly accurate statistics of suicide attempts, studies report that one of every 1,000 youths attempt suicide (Jabobziner, 1965) with 12% of all suicide attempts being made by adolescents (Corder, 1974). There have been only a few studies which have concentrated on the occurence of suicidal ideation and behaviors in the nonpsychiatric population of young adults. A startling finding by Cavan (1965) reports that 80% of 134 young persons of varying backgrounds indicated wishing for death with only 19% never thinking of suicide or wishing for death. In a study of 43 psychology students, Lester (1968) reports 39 admitting to varying degrees of suicidal thoughts, including 5 attempters, 5 threatning suicide and 19 considering suicide. In a comprehensive

pilot study, Mintz (1974) distributed over 3,000 questionnaires to the general population in the Los Angeles area. A return of over 2,000 questionnaires revealed four persons in every 100 had made a suicide attempt.

Leonard and Flinn (1972) also found high rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviors in the young population they studied. Their study involving 352 college students from varying majors and 128 Airforce basic trainees with median ages of 21 and 19 respectively, revealed 56% with no suicidal thinking. Twenty-two percent reported minimal consideration of suicide, 8% nonserious threats and gestures and 10% had serious suicide thoughts or serious attempts.

The findings of these studies reveal a need for further research concerning the occurence of suicidal thinking and suicide attempts among young adult non-psychiatric populations. Specifically, there is a need to determine whether the probability of suicidal thinking has changed over time. The preceeding studies are over a decade old and suicide rates for young adults have gone up over 40% during this intervening period (Tolsma, 1984). Also, there is a need to obtain more in depth data regarding the circumstances and attitudes of young adults who are at risk in regard to suicidal thinking or suicide attempts.

It was based on the preceding needs that the present study was designed. However, there was a second rationale for the study. That rationale had to do with the follow-up of a methodology developed by Bailey and Hernandez (1982). These authors developed a method which provides information regarding a person's thoughts of suicide by the study of projections onto a character depicted as experiencing difficult life circumstances.

The present study implemented this method in conjunction with a comprehensive suicide questionnaire directly addressing an individual's thoughts of suicide and suicidal behaviors. By comparing the reported suicide thoughts and behaviors of the subjects who project suicide onto the scenarios developed by Bailey and Hernandez (1982) versus the subjects who do not project suicide onto the scenarios it will be possible to test whether the instrument has any predictive validity in regard to identification of a person's suicidal risk.

Method

Subjects

Participants in the study were students from a Stephen F. Austin State University introductory psychology course. Forty-three females and 23 males were included in the study. The male-female ratio approximates the sex ratio of reported suicide attempts on campus. Freshmen

through senior classifications were represented with the median classification being sophomore. The students come from varying hometowns drawing primarily from the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas and their surrounding communities, as well as East Texas rural communities.

Apparatus and Procedure

The study was conducted during a single class period. Participation in the study was voluntary and students were assured of anonymity. Each student was given one of 18 scenarios portraying a fictitious character who was experiencing difficult life circumstances. The participants were unaware at the time they responded to the scenarios that the subject matter under study was suicide. They were simply asked to list three things the character might be thinking of doing in response to the adverse circumstances. Upon completion of the scenario, they were given a debriefing and those willing to voluntarily cooperate further responded to an extended questionnaire regarding suicidal thinking and suicidal behavior.

The scenario responses were scored to determine the projection or nonprojection of suicide onto the character in the adverse life circumstances. Responses on the extended suicide questionnaire were compared between projectors and nonprojectors. Analyses also

compared male and female responses on the extended questionnaire.

Results

Projected Suicide

Sixty-two percent of the subjects projected suicide in response to the adverse life scenarios. Differences in projection rates between male and female subjects yielded no statistically significant differences. Quantitatively female projection tended to occur more frequently than male projection (Females=67%, Males=53%).

The chi-square analysis of projectors and nonprojectors concerning whether they had thought about suicide in order to call attention to problems they were experiencing proved significant $\chi^2(1, N=66)=4.31$, $p<.05$. Forty-nine percent of the projectors thought about suicide in order to call attention to themselves whereas 20% of the nonprojectors thought about attempting suicide for attention.

When questioned about suicidal thoughts in terms of a desire to actually kill themselves, projectors more often responded affirmatively. Here statistical differences were only of borderline significance, $\chi^2(1, N=66)=3.02$, $p<.07$. Still, the quantitative differences were notable. Fifty-one percent of the projectors and 24% of the nonprojectors thought about terms of actually dying.

The projectors were shown to have reported that during periods of extreme stress they thought about suicide significantly more often than the nonprojectors (t =-2.23, df 65, $p<.05$). The mean of the projectors was effected by the extreme responses of four projectors who reported thinking about suicide at least once a day.

The communication of the participant's suicidal thinking to others was reported more often in the projectors. Projectors exhibited one to two communications in 27% of the responses and 5% reported three to five communications. Twenty percent of the nonprojectors reported communications of suicide thoughts to others without any reports of more than two communications. Although these differences are not statistically significant, the communication of suicidal thinking in 32% of the projectors is qualitatively higher than the reports of communication in the nonprojectors.

There were five persons who reported having made a suicide attempt. Of these five attempters, two were nonprojectors and three were projectors.

Extended Questionnaire

T-Test analysis showed that females were significantly more likely to have thoughts of suicide during the past year (t=1.62, df 65, $p<.05$). Males reported

thinking of suicide only in the never and rarely categories. While females responses had showed variance across the response categories.

A chi-square analysis of males and females responses concerning thinking about suicide as a cry for help proved significant, $\chi^2(1, N=66)=5.03$, $p<.05$. Forty-seven percent of the females thought about suicide with the intent of gaining attention to their problems, while only 17% of the males thought about suicide for the same reason.

Overall, 13% of the respondents reported having used suicide as a threat. There were no differences between males and females regarding thinking of using suicide as a threat (Males = 13%, Females = 12%).

There were five suicide attempters revealed through the study, all female. Three of the attempters considered their action as life endangering. One of the female attempters had made more than one attempt.

Discussion

As one of the main purposes of this study was to test the instrument of Bailey and Hernandez (1982), this study demonstrated statistically higher occurence of suicidal thinking for the scenario projectors than in nonprojectors.

Projectors reported thinking about suicide to call attention to their need of help with problems more often

than nonprojectors (nonprojectors = 24%, projectors = 51%). As well projectors report a higher occurence of suicidal thinking in periods of great stress with four reports of "Thoughts of suicide at least once per day."

A statistically significant difference was approached on the item in which suicide thoughts were qualified in terms of "Thinking about suicide in order to kill yourself", (Projectors = 51%, nonprojectors = 24%).

A second purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of an increase in suicidal thinking in the nonpsychiatric young adult population over the past ten year period. This study's results are difficult to compare with previous studies however, some contrasts can be made. The 1972 Leonard and Flinn study of suicide ideation in the nonpsychiatric young adult population had been chosen to serve as the contrasting study. Leonard and Flinn report 56% of their sample had no suicidal thoughts; the current study had 33% percent report never thinking of suicide for themselves. Minimal consideration of thoughts of suicide was found in 22% of the previous study and 41% of the current sample replied suicide thoughts were "Just passing thoughts". Eight percent of the respondents in the Leonard and Flinn study reported nonserious thoughts or gestures with the contrast of 15% of the subjects in the current study

reporting serious thoughts with minimal possibility of an attempt. Serious thoughts with a possibility of attempts were reported as 8% in the Leonard and Flinn sample and 4% in the present study. Attempts were reported as 2% in the previous study and 8% in the current study. These findings imply a possible quantitative increase in suicidal thinking and attempts. This finding is consistant with the current rise in suicides in the young adult population. More in depth research of previous studies and more comprehensive future research must be conducted for validation of this finding.

The extended questionnaire included open-ended questions concerning several aspects of suicide threats and attempts, the most interesting concerned the reported purpose of suicide threats and the nature and circumstances of suicide attempts. There were eight reports of using suicide as a threat. "Getting someone to change their behavior" was reported by three of the respondants. Two people gave the purpose of "Getting even" with someone as a suicide threat. The purpose of preventing a relationship from breaking up was indicated in two cases. One person implied the threat was an attention getting device. An especially interesting aspect of suicide as a threat revealed in this study was the finding of equal percentages of threats made by males and females (Males = 13%, Females = 12%).

Research indicates females make the majority of suicide attempts (Goldenberg, 1977). This study included five attempters, all being females. Nonprojectors represented two of the cases and three were projectors. One participant indicated making more than one attempt. A point of interest was that this female was a nonprojector.

The single given cause reported as precipitating suicide attempts regarded problems or break up of boyfriend relationships. The dominance of romantic relationship problems indicates it as a primary factor of crisis in the young adult population, in females as well as males. All male suicide threateners specified their threats related to the circumstances of relationship problems. Further research must be conducted to study relationship problems as influencing suicide attempts and the possibility of its influence on actual suicides.

Although the current use of the scenario methodology of Bailey and Hernandez showed that projectors have higher degrees of suicidal thinking, this preliminary study suggests that the scenario methodology is not, as currently used, an efficient predictor of suicidal risk. Of the total group, 8% of the subjects reported a suicide attempt, and 62% of the total group were suicide projectors. This would lead to an unexceptably high false positive rate if projected suicidal ideation were used to predict

suicide attempts. To make matters worse, two of the five attempters were nonprojectors and only three were projectors. Therefore, while the data supports the conclusion that projection of suicide by an individual indicates a higher degree of suicide thinking the results have demonstrated no implications for actual suicide risk.

Currently a modification of the methodology is in progress. As originally designed the participant is simply asked to list three things the character is thinking of doing. The modified version asks the respondents for three things they would consider doing if they were in the character's position. This modification significantly reduces the probability of projected suicide. Given the preliminary findings based on the revised methodology, we expect that the number of false positives that the current methodology yields will be significantly reduced. In conclusion, the value of using projected suicidal ideation as a predictive devise for revealing actual suicidal risk must be left to future research.

FOOTNOTES

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